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The Day Reading

You can engage and instruct both advanced readers and nonreaders at the same time.

Bruce Hansen

Kendra and Gerard were opposites. Kendra entered my 4th grade class reading at a late 5th grade level; Gerard tested at the 1st grade level. As outliers, neither child fit into any of my reading groups. It was unthinkable to let Gerard languish or to let Kendra waste a year. How could I help Gerard read and still

keep Kendra challenged?

Both students came from similar blue-collar family backgrounds, but Kendra did something that Gerard didn't do. She read for fun. For Kendra, reading was a form of play. She had her nose in a book nearly every free minute. For the sake of Gerard and the other struggling readers in that class, I made it my goal to lead my class to the place where Kendra dwelled: a land where reading was play—something to do during unstructured time.

Evaluating Strategies

I looked carefully at my reading program to see what strategies were most effective at opening the world of reading to my students. The students in

my reading groups appeared to be on task and knew what was expected of them. But when reading instruction was limited to skill-based lessons given during our class period for reading groups, most students did not regularly choose reading as a free-time activity, and never once did any of them, including Kendra, pick up our reader during free time. Maybe the reader, its workbooks, and skill-based lessons were not what my students needed.

Story time, on the other hand, seemed to encourage students to read on their own. During story time, I gave students the background knowledge and vocabulary they needed to understand the book I was reading aloud. I also put out copies of the book I was

reading and other books by the same author or in the same genre or topic area. If students picked up these books for silent reading, I counted that as a step toward viewing reading as play.

Sustained silent reading was another successful strategy. I set a timer, and all class members read for 20 minutes. The class goal was that, between whole-class reading instruction time and the silent reading period, each student would read at least 3,000 words in class each day (about 10 pages of a typical 4th grade novel).

Kendra was in heaven. She and the other students already hooked on reading read the entire time and begged for more. Some students who teetered on the edge of seeing reading as play came around when there was nothing to do but read. Before long, many of them were choosing to read even when there were other options.

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library. This wasn't working.

Both Gerard and Mindy had tested at the upper end of the 1st grade reading level, but they resisted the books I offered at their reading level because they were embarrassed to read “baby” books. To address this, once a week I read a 1st grade picture book to the class. The students loved the simple stories and terrific pictures. I told the class that I expected everyone to read at least one of these books a week. (I had whispered to Kendra that the picture book was optional for her.)

Soon, Mindy, seeing that nearly everyone had a book at this level, read

Maybe I didn't need to teach skills.

Maybe I just needed to make certain that my students were reading. I looked at the research and found support for this idea from writers like Stephen Krashen (2004), who wrote,

When children read for pleasure, when they get “hooked on books,” they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called “language skills” many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. (p. 149)

Became Play

Reaching the Hard Core

With a robust story time and sustained silent reading, most of my students appeared to enjoy reading. Who was left? The unread hard core: Gerard, Mindy, and a few others. During silent reading, Gerard would idly flip through nonfiction books about airplanes or trucks. He didn't read. He just looked.

Because my nonreaders were flipping through nonfiction texts as a way to avoid actual reading, I decided to require students to read fiction during sustained silent reading. (I did allow students to read nonfiction at other times.) When I announced this new policy, Kendra didn't mind, but Gerard, Mindy, and some other weak readers were lost. They spent much of the silent reading time browsing the classroom

without self-consciousness. She started enjoying sustained silent reading and began taking books home to get additional reading points. The combination of forbidding nonfiction and making easier books more socially acceptable also helped Gerard: Within a few weeks, he went from reading just 200 words a day to reading 2,000.

But What About Skills?

I felt good about everything I was doing—except for the elephant in the room that I was trying to ignore. Our school's reading program stated that I should be teaching skills—the very thing that made reading a chore for both Kendra and Gerard.

No one taught Kendra reading skills. She acquired them simply by reading.

I worried that if I spent my reading block teaching skills instead of promoting reading for pleasure, I would again have to break my students into small groups based on skills. Research has revealed that ability grouping is ineffective—particularly for students in the lowest and highest groups (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). But without these groups, how could I meet the diverse needs of all my students? Would a lesson that engaged Kendra be appropriate for Gerard?

Reading to Learn Together

At about that time, my principal put in my cubby a much-photocopied sheet of paper with some research results. Some of the findings were about the effectiveness of whole-class literature instruc-

tion. (For some similar research, see Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, and Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999.) This information gave me permission to abandon skill-based reading using the basal reader and move to engaging novels and other high-quality literature.

With truly beautiful literature, my highest-performing students could be touched and learn something new. If I prepared my struggling students well, they would be able to read and understand more than they could have in any remedial program. They would also gain confidence from being part of the “in” group.

I got my hands on a class set of *Henry and Beezus* by Beverly Cleary, a fabulous story set in the late 1950s. I brought in garage-sale artifacts from that era: everything from vintage roller skates to milk bottles, toys to pants-stretchers. I would start a typical lesson by discussing vocabulary and concepts that students would need to get the most out of the reading that day. Each day, I read part of the story aloud to the class while students followed in their copy of the book.

It became obvious that not all students could learn essential reading and writing skills simply through immersion in literature. Some students were making astounding improvements that often showed up in their own writing, but others, despite enjoying and understanding the book, weren't noticing the “tricks” Cleary used to make her writing so strong. They needed direct instruction, but teaching the skills and techniques in isolation didn't help them.

I noticed, however, that if I explicitly taught skills like using word attack strategies, determining an author's purpose, and making inferences within a literature lesson, students caught on more quickly than when I taught similar material using worksheets. They could see the value of the lesson and apply it right on the spot. It made sense to

them. During the reading each day, we paused to discuss Cleary's writing. We used the six analytical writing traits to figure out how Cleary created suspense or humor or how she used punctuation to make her meaning clear (Culham, 2003; Hansen, 2006).

Following my oral reading, students were assigned to reread what I had just read to them. This gave students a chance to practice. Advanced students, like Kendra, did not have to reread; they could read a different Cleary book. Gerard and Mindy reread the book with

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me, a parent volunteer, or a peer tutor. Once a week, students would partner-read the section they had just read silently, so I could listen and assess fluency. This partner-reading also motivated Gerard and Mindy to learn the hard words. They ached to fit in, and I made sure they were able to read at least two or three pages to a buddy. They were so proud to carry around their Cleary book.

After the daily reading, students would have a writing assignment connected to what we observed about Cleary's story that day. They also were expected to write at least 90 words in a 20-minute journal period each day. By the end of 4th grade, Gerard was able to meet that goal, and Kendra developed a passion for writing—often taking her journal home to add hundreds of words.

Everybody Learns

The whole-class book enabled me to make certain that my lowest-performing students were reading their 3,000 words

each day and to help my high achievers like Kendra to see and learn things far beyond what they could soak up on their own.

The *Henry and Beezus* unit proved to be so much fun that our class could hardly wait until the next whole-class book. At the end of that year, Gerard had gained more than two years in his reading level, according to our placement tests. He gave me a note thanking me for teaching him “to be good and to be a good reader.” Kendra gave me an amazing 10-page story she'd written in the style of Beverly Cleary.

I learned more than any of my students. I learned that when students come to enjoy reading, fewer reading skills need to be taught. I learned the value of using excellent literature to give students skills they weren't picking up on their own. Gerard never developed a love of reading, but he did see himself as a reader. And I saw myself as a teacher who could reach students across the ability spectrum. **EL**

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